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March 2, 2023

Chair Samantha Vang
House Agriculture Finance and Policy Committee
100 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.
St. Paul, MN 55155

Dear Chair Vang and members of the committee:

On behalf of Minnesota Farmers Union (MFU), I write to share our support for Rep. Nelson's bills to establish a meat processing navigator position at MDA (HF1302) and to establish meat processor training grants (HF1303). The bottleneck in meat processing continues to be a challenge for our family farmer members as they work to expand their operations and meet local demand. Helping local and regional processors navigate the web of standards and regulations will help strengthen these small businesses and support family farmers.

First, the meat processing navigator position (HF1303)—which mirrors the proposal brought forward by Governor Walz in his budget—will help more processors get off the ground. Given the severe bottleneck in local processing and a growing demand for locally-raised meat, many of our members are exploring opportunities to process their own livestock and that of their neighbors. In this work, MDA's inspection staff is an excellent partner, providing advice and ensuring that our members don't make expensive mistakes in design and construction. That said, at present MDA's primary mission is inspection and they can only do so much.

Adding a navigator position will help MDA expand their direct service to processors who are working to get businesses started, helping them achieve inspected status, comply with regulations, and access state and federal funding. Not only that, but since it's housed in the inspection program, this position will bring a one-to-one federal match.

Second, the investment in training (HF1303) is well-timed, because two colleges—Central Lakes and Ridgewater—just started meat processing training programs this fall. Both programs were designed in close partnership with industry and will have flexible options for customized training. Providing support for processors or their employees to attend trainings at these colleges or other institutions could help those businesses up their inspection status, add new species, incorporate halal, kosher, or other practices, or execute a generational transition. All these actions will serve local farmers well.

Finally, these programs will pair well with needed investments in the AGRI Value Added program, investments in MN Grown, and programs that will help in worker recruitment and retention. Taken together, this work is helping to rebuild a system that was long neglected in Minnesota. We have a long way to go, but we are grateful for your committee's work to build a food system that is more distributed, resilient, and fair for workers, consumers, and farmers.

Thank you to your committee for your strong support of local meat processing. If you have any questions, please contact our Government Relations Director, Stu Lourey, at stu@mfu.org or (320) 232-2047 (C). Thank you for considering the needs and perspectives of Minnesota's farm families.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gary Wertish". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent "G" and "W".

Gary Wertish
President, Minnesota Farmers Union